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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DRUZE ELECTION STRENGTHENS JUMBLATT BUT
STIRS DISCORD

SUMMARY

11. (SBU/NF) The first-ever election for the Druze Doctrinal Council was conducted on September 24. The election produced an important victory for Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, both in cementing his control over the Council and in putting his followers in charge of the \$800 million Druze Endowment, and a loss for Syria and its allies among the Druze. The election was also a victory for March 14 forces, who had passed the law calling for Council elections, over President Lahoud's objection, in order to break the lock that Syrian-allied Druze had held on the Council for many years. The new Council will form a Board which will appoint the new Shaykh al-Aql, the paramount Druze religious leader. In reaction to Sunday's election, pro-Syrian Druze leader Arsalan appointed his own Shaykh al-Aql, whom President Lahoud promptly received at the presidential palace. Tensions are high among the Druze, but for the moment the two sides of the dispute seem determined to pursue a solution in the courts. End Summary.

UNPRECEDENTED ELECTIONS

12. (SBU) The March 8/March 14 divide in Lebanon's political line-up played itself out in the Druze community last weekend when the Druze Electoral College elected board members to the Druze Doctrinal Council for the first time in its history. The members, who had in the past been appointed by Druze clergy, will elect the next "Shaykh al Aql," the paramount Druze religious leader. The election, which

took place under a law passed by March 14 MPs along with the tacit consent of Speaker Nabih Berri, represents a political victory for Walid Jumblatt. It was also a defeat for President Lahoud, who had declined to approve the election law when it was first presented in December 2005; the law was passed by a super-majority in June 2006.

At stake is control of the lucrative Druze Endowment, whose USD 800 million in assets are managed by the Druze Doctrinal Council.

REINFORCES JUMBLATT BUT DIVIDES DRUZE COMMUNITY

13. (SBU) Should Jumblatt's allies on the Council secure control of the Endowment, Jumblatt's position as Druze political leader may be unassailable for the foreseeable future. However, the controversy over control of the Council and the Endowment has the potential to divide the Druze community. Pro-Syrian political leader Talal Arsalan reacted to the Council election by appointing his own Shaykh al-Aql, Nasr al-Deen Ghareeb. President Lahoud on Tuesday exploited this division by inviting Ghareeb to Baabda Palace.

14. (SBU/NF) In a September 26 telephone conversation with Pol BEIRUT 00003177 002 OF 002

staff, Arsalan said that the political divisions within the Druze community are worsening and could "get out of control" when the new Council starts taking control over the Endowment. He said "the Endowment is estimated at approximately \$800 million and with some development projects it could reach well above \$1 billion." Taking a firm stand against Jumblatt, Arsalan added "Jumblatt wants to control the Endowment for his own political gains and we shall not allow this to happen because it is against the Druze faith and traditions."

JUMBLATT ALLIES ACCUSE SYRIA OF INTERFERENCE

15. (SBU/NF) Jumblatt-allied MPs Wael Abu and Akram Shuhayyeb told us September 26 that Arsalan's nomination of Shaykh Ghareeb is illegal and reflects a Syrian push to cause division within the Druze community. The Council, once it elects a new Shaykh al-Aql, will take legal measures against Ghareeb; he will most likely face charges of usurping power. For the time being, both sides of the dispute seemed determined to resolve the issue in the courts. FELTMAN